

Exceptionally Wrong Turn in Rhetorical Studies:

General Semantics,
Communications Pedagogy
and the Monster Study

David Beard
rhetoricguy@gmail.com; dbeard@d.umn.edu
University of Minnesota Duluth
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Hypothesis (1):

We have under-theorized and under-historicized midcentury rhetorical theory.

Hypothesis (2):

The central theory of
midcentury speech and writing
instruction was General
Semantics

Objection:

General Semantics (GS) is in none of the major rhetoric textbooks and anthologies.

Is GS a legitimate rhetorical theory?

Answer (1):

General Semantics (GS)
offered:

- heuristics for message production
- hermeneutics for message interpretation and evaluation
- a pedagogy derived from both

Answer (2):

General Semantics (GS) was embedded in the work of acknowledged rhetorical theorists:

- Irving Lee (Speech)
- Kenneth Burke (Literature)
- Lots of Compositionists

Hypothesis (3):

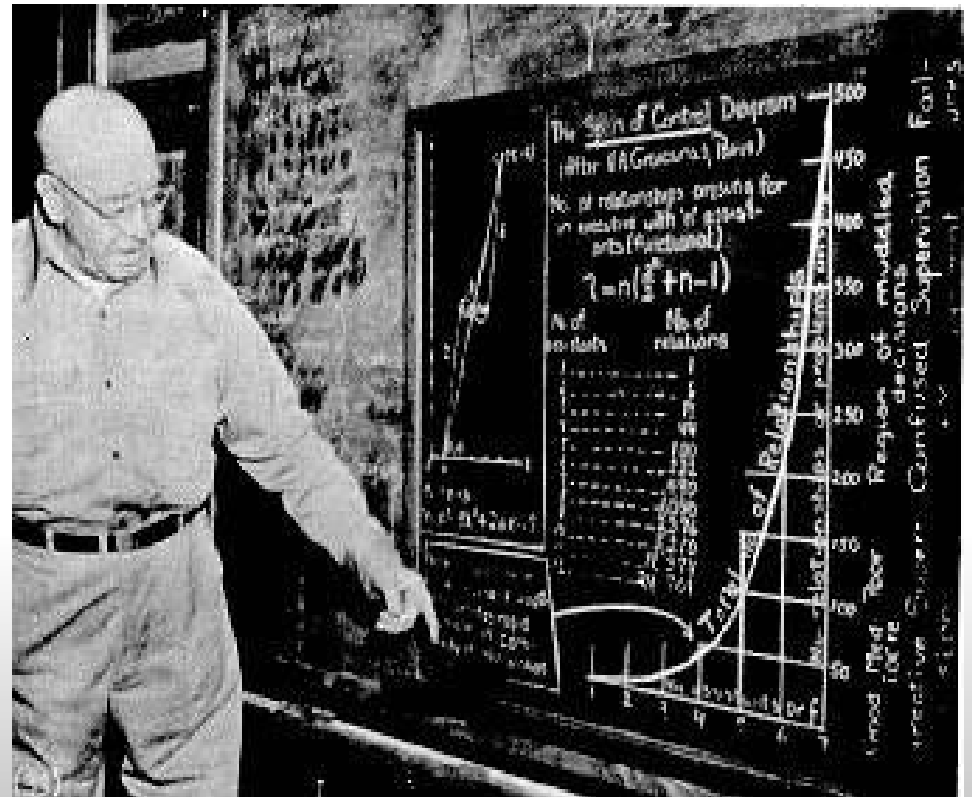
General Semantics (GS) was unlike many other rhetorical theories, in that it became intertwined with scientific impulses and was "scientifically" tested.

Claim:

General Semantics was an "exceptionally wrong turn" because its followers believed that it could not only explain processes of communication...

...it could make, unmake and remake good communicators.

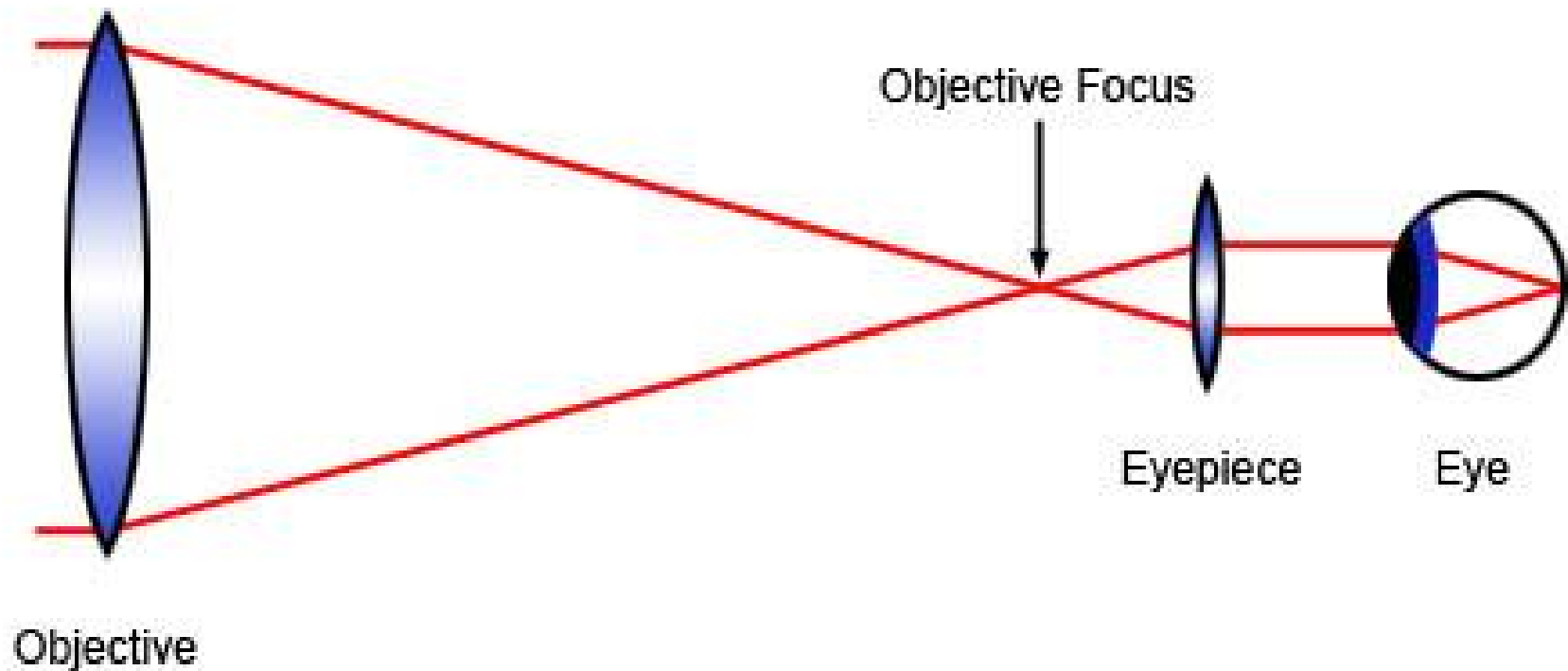
On the Rhetorical Roots of General Semantics



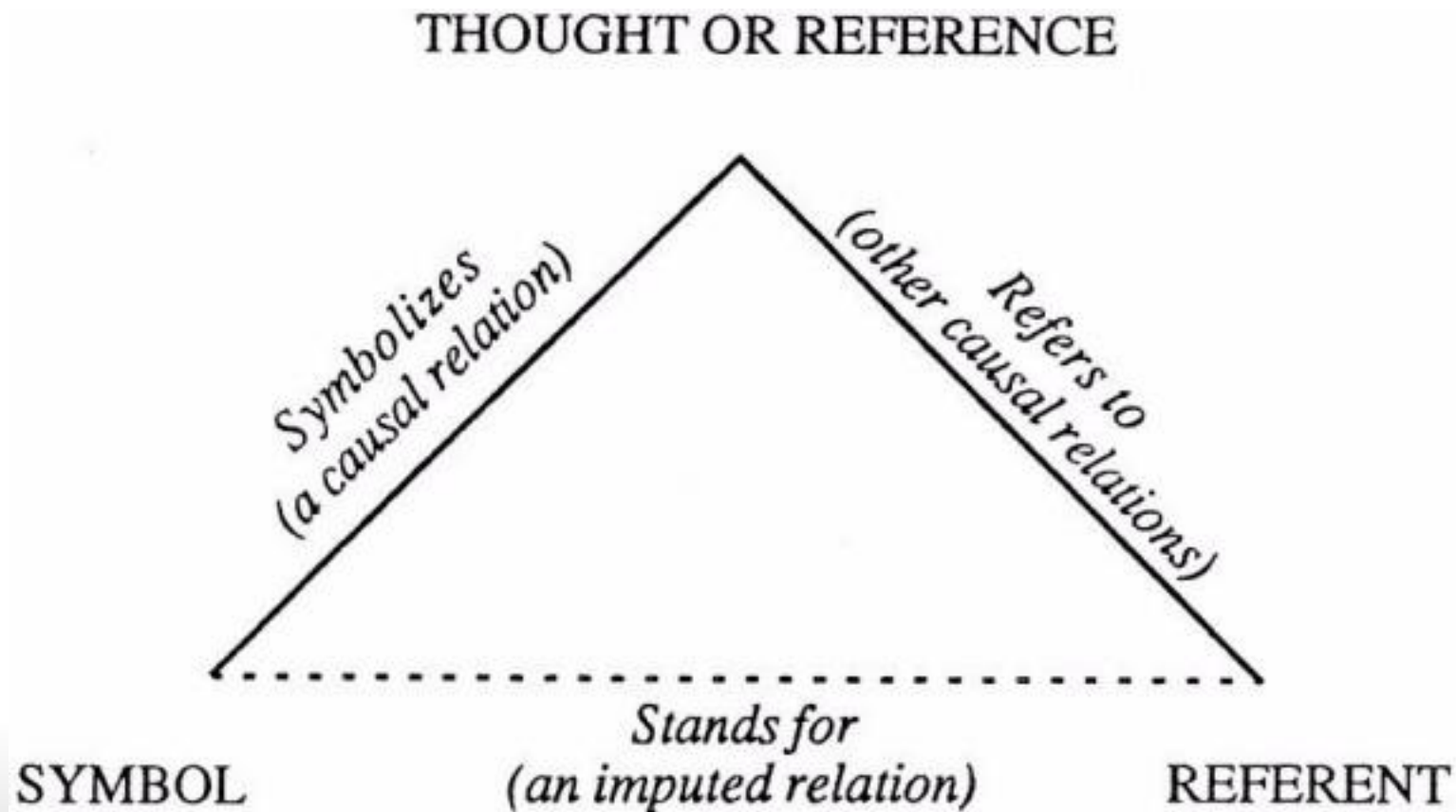
On the Rhetorical Roots of General Semantics

Communication is enabled by
adjusting the relationship
between world, mind and
word.

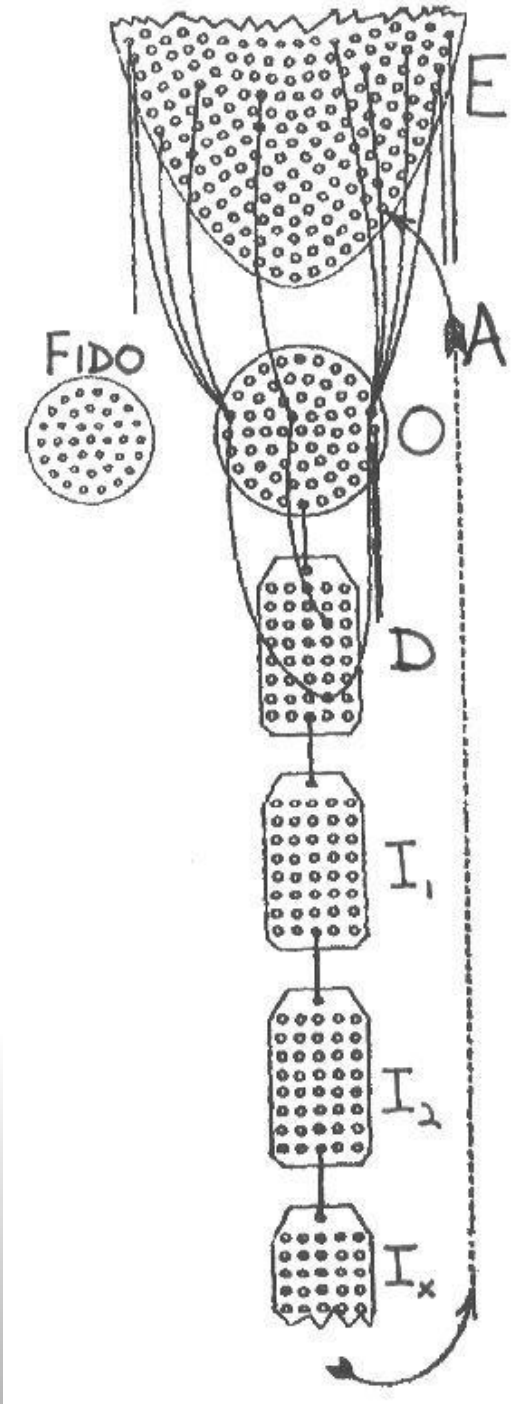
Frege's Telescope



Richards and Ogden's Triangle



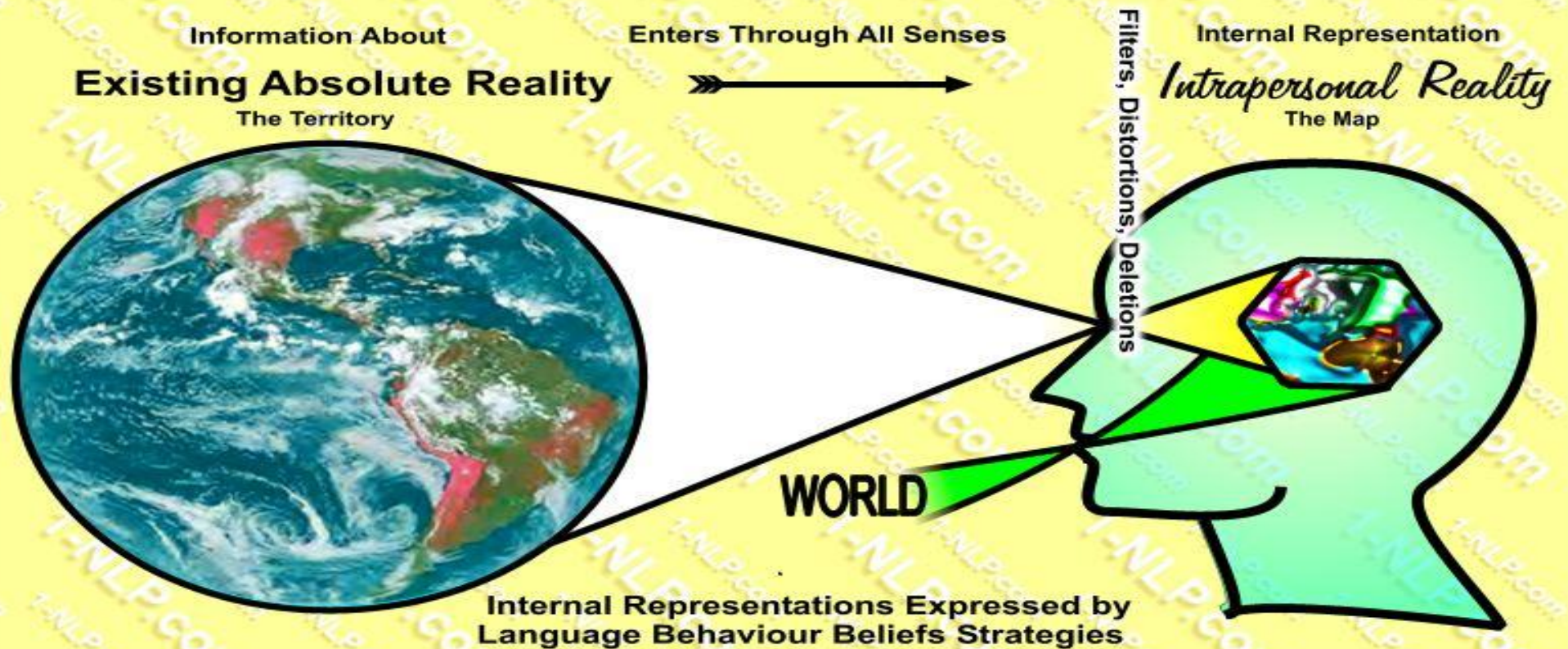
Korzybski's Structural Differential



Hayakawa's Maxim:

The Map Is Not The Territory

"But some maps are more likely to get you from A - Z than others ..."



Change The Map, You Change "The World"



www.1-NLP.com

Consequences of GS:

Communication is dependent on a community of minds similarly adjusted to the correct relationship between sense & reference, symbol & referent, objective reality, description & inferences, map & territory.



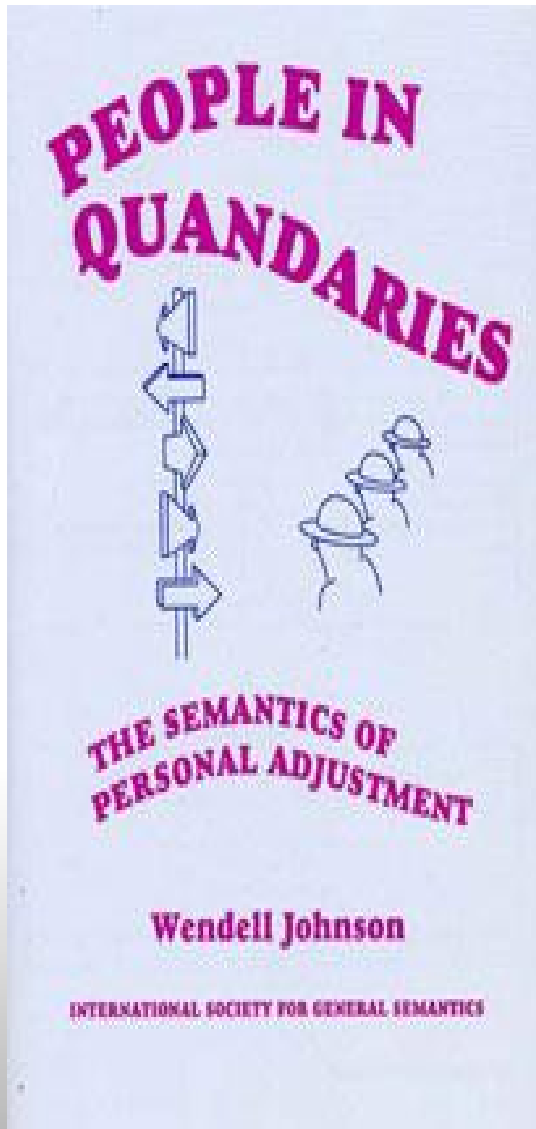
Wendell Johnson



Wendell Johnson

- 1906-1965
- Professor of Speech Pathology at U of Iowa
- Teacher of GS
- Believed that GS was the key to curing his own stuttering.

Wendell Johnson



Quandaries [are] verbal cocoons in which individuals elaborately encase themselves, and from which... they do not tend to hatch. [The] structure of these cocoons appears to be determined... by the structure of the society in which they are formed -- and the structure of this society [is] determined significantly by the structure of the language which we so unconsciously acquire and so unreflectively employ. (*PIQ*)

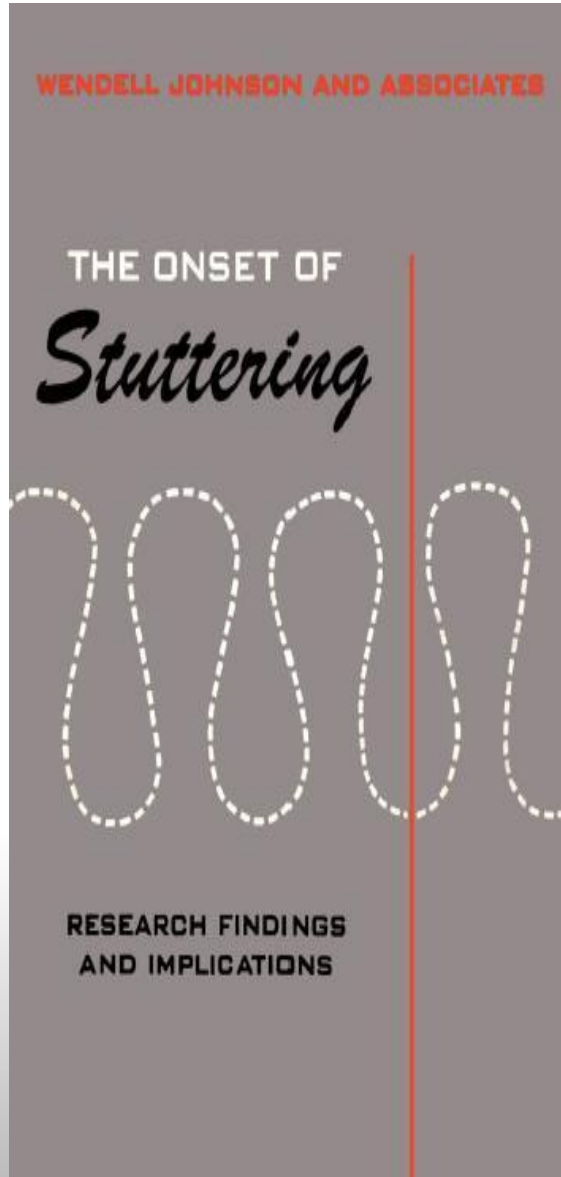
Wendell Johnson

People in distress or confusion have difficulty... making clear to others, and to themselves as well, what their problems are. In part, this is because they use a vague language... Also, they have an essentially irresponsible way of mixing fact and opinion, of confusing is with "looks like..." They do not make good use of the information they have in trying to understand their problems and in figuring out what, if anything, to do about them. (*L&R*)

Wendell Johnson

The one form of human behavior that is consistently honest by conscious design is that behavior which is scientific. If you really believe that honesty is the best policy then you will strive to behave as scientifically as possible. If you try it you may decide against it, but then at least you will know that, by so far, you prefer dishonesty. (*YEL*)

Johnson's Diagnosogenic Model



Parental "diagnoses" of their children's speech as the disorder "stuttering," led to chronic "stuttering."

Children became stutterers because they came to believe that they were stutterers -- because the label that had been applied to their "map" claimed that they stuttered, and they believed it.

"Monster Study"

A University of Iowa MA thesis project
to induce and cure stuttering

by labeling stutterers as non-stutterers
& by labeling non-stutterers as
stutterers

and seeing what happened...

Monster Study

Parameters

Population

Procedures

Surprising Results

Implications

- Ethical
- For GS as a scientific theory
- For GS as a rhetorical theory

Monster Study: Parameters

- **Group IA:** 5 stutterers told "You do not stutter. Your speech is fine."
- **Group IB:** 5 stutterers told "Yes, your speech is as bad as people say."
- **Group IIA:** 6 non-stutterers told that their speech was not normal at all, that they were beginning to stutter and that they must correct this immediately.
- **Group IIB:** 6 normal speakers treated as such.

Monster Study: Population

Residents of Soldiers and Sailors Orphans' Home (not all orphans -- some removed from the care of their parents for financial reasons).

All below-average IQ

Some with below-age-appropriate literacy levels.

"Not much can be done..."

Monster Study: Procedures

Initial Tests:

IQ, Handedness (spool, squeeze, eye dominance tests)

They'd draw blood, hook themselves to electrodes, strike their knees to test reflexes, whip out notebooks ...and transcribe their own and others' faltering speech. They'd administer electroshock and shoot guns off near each other's ears... They'd also put casts on one another's arms, since it was hoped that immobilizing a person's dominant hand somehow would untangle confused brain signals. At one point, about 30 stutterers, including Johnson, wandered the Iowa campus with their arms wrapped in plaster, sometimes playing wrong-handed badminton.

(NYT)

Monster Study: Procedures

Stutterers who were relabeled non-stutterers:

'You'll outgrow [the stuttering], and you will be able to speak even much better than you are speaking now. . . . Pay no attention to what others say about your speaking ability for undoubtedly they do not realize that this is only a phase.'

Monster Study: Procedures

Non-stutterers who were relabeled stutterers:

"The staff has come to the conclusion that you have a great deal of trouble with your speech. . . . You have many of the symptoms of a child who is beginning to stutter. You must try to stop yourself immediately. Use your will power. . . . Do anything to keep from stuttering. . . . Don't ever speak unless you can do it right. You see how [the name of a child in the institution who stuttered severely] stutters, don't you? Well, he undoubtedly started

Monster Study: Surprising Results

Phrased impolitely, the test had no systematic effect on stuttering.

Some stutterers labeled non-stutterers got worse, some got better.

Some non-stutterers labeled stutterers got worse,
some got better.

Some improved in some aspects of disfluency but worsened in others.

Monster Study: Surprising Defenses

Tudor claimed at the time that matrons at the home did not reinforce the experiment.

Tudor claimed that the dictaphone did not allow her to fully measure initial stuttering among some students (as they feared it).

Tudor claimed, decades later, that she knew the diagnosogenic theory was accurate, even if not proven by her thesis, because it undergirded her practice as an SLP.

Monster Study: Unintended Consequences

It may not have created stutterers, but the "Monster Study" created lifelong communication apprehension among the orphans.

They were awarded nearly \$1 million in damages.

Implications for ethics

The "Monster Study" has been the subject of an entire volume about whether,

- ...if in fact no stutterers were created, there was any ethical harm

- ...if in fact some students improved their disfluency, there was any ethical harm

- ...if we can judge the ethics of human subjects research in the era before IRB.

Implications for GS as a scientific theory

If GS was to be a scientifically testable theory of communication, the "Monster Study" was not the test to prove it.

Tudor claimed that the linguistic environment was too complex for her work to have a determining force.

Maybe her claim is generalizable as a limitation of GS as a testable theory.

Implications for GS as a rhetorical theory

To the extent that GS replaced explaining the process of effective "communication" with explaining the mental maps and mental health of "communicators..."

...it swerved from the norms of the rhetorical tradition.

Implications for current rhetorical theory

One of the major questions of recent rhetorical theory has been in rhetorical agency, as visible:

- in postmodern challenges to the author (Barthes, Foucault)
- in the postmodern challenge to the subject (Althusser)
- in the development of posthumanist theories of communication (Latour, actor-network theory)
- in the development of models of persuasion that explore whether audiences are moved or whether they are constituted (Charland)

I wonder whether GS might remind us that the proper subject of rhetoric is speech-in-action, not the speaker, writing-in-action, not the writer.

Questions and Comments

David Beard

Department of Writing Studies

University of Minnesota Duluth

Duluth, MN 55812

dbeard@d.umn.edu

rhetoricguy@gmail.com